

Piping Plovers at Sleeping Bear Dunes

What is a Piping Plover?

The Piping Plover (*Charadrius melodus*) is an endangered shorebird. They are sand-colored on the back and white below. During the breeding season adults have a black forehead band between the eyes and a single black band around the neck. (Piping Plovers are often mistaken for their larger relative the Killdeer, which is commonly seen at parks, playgrounds, and golf courses, and has two dark bands around the neck.) Piping Plovers typically nest on beaches with cobble, but have also nested on bluffs and interdunal pannes. There are three small populations: one in the Great Plains, one on the Atlantic Coast, and the one here in the Great Lakes. They winter together on the Gulf and Atlantic Coasts, but travel to the separate areas during the breeding season. It is a special opportunity to be able to observe Piping Plovers since there are only between 50 and 60 nesting pairs in the entire Great Lakes area and less than 5000 individuals



Adult Female with Day-old Chick (Actual Size)

When to Look for Piping Plovers

Piping Plovers can be found at Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore from late April through mid-August. They return in late April and early May after spending the fall and winter months on the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts from North Carolina to Texas. Piping Plovers remain here through the summer to nest and raise their young.

In mid-July the females begin forming flocks and

migrating south, leaving their mates to watch over the chicks until they learn to fly.

Once the chicks are independent in late July the males and chicks also begin to leave Sleeping Bear Dunes. By late August they all have left for their winter homes. We won't see them again here until the following April.

Where to Look for Piping Plovers

The greatest concentration of Piping Plovers in the Great Lakes occurs at Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. On the mainland at Sleeping Bear most of the Piping Plovers nest near the mouth of the Platte River. There have also been nests in the Sleeping Bear Point area and near the Southern boundary of the park. In addition, there are several pairs breeding and rearing young on North Manitou Island.

The areas around the nests are roped off during the breeding season to protect the birds from human disturbances that would cause them to abandon their nests. Because Plover eggs and small chicks are very well camouflaged, well-meaning Plover

watchers and beach users could easily step on them if allowed in the nesting area.

It is, however, possible to observe all aspects of Plover behavior from outside the Plover-protection fences. To have the best viewing at Platte Point you will need to wade across the river at the river mouth or at the canoe take-out and follow outside the fencing along the Lake Michigan shoreline. Look especially around the wet areas near the point and in the cobble. Since Piping Plovers are well camouflaged you might need to watch for a while before you see them.

Nesting Piping Plovers can also be seen about 1 mile North of the Platte River mouth.

How the Park Service helps Piping Plovers

Sleeping Bear Dunes has an active Plover monitoring and protection program in conjunction with the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Michigan DNR, the University of Minnesota and the University of Michigan Biological Station, as well as other agencies.

When the Piping Plovers return in the spring, park staff members begin watching their activities. Once they begin to establish territories, staff and volunteers rope off the nesting areas. This prevents human disturbance which might cause the birds to abandon their nests, as well as protecting eggs from being stepped on accidentally.

Once a complete clutch of 4 eggs has been laid, trained staff build an enclosure, a wire fence with a mesh top, around the nest site. This prevents predators such as dogs, gulls, crows, skunks, and

raccoons from taking the eggs, while allowing the Plovers to pass easily in and out.

During incubation, each pair of Piping Plovers is checked daily to make sure that both are present and taking care of their eggs. If something should happen to one of the pair, the other is likely to abandon the nest. In that case, park personnel will transport the eggs to the University of Michigan Biological Station to be raised in captivity and released when they are independent.

After the chicks hatch, they are monitored until they can fly well.

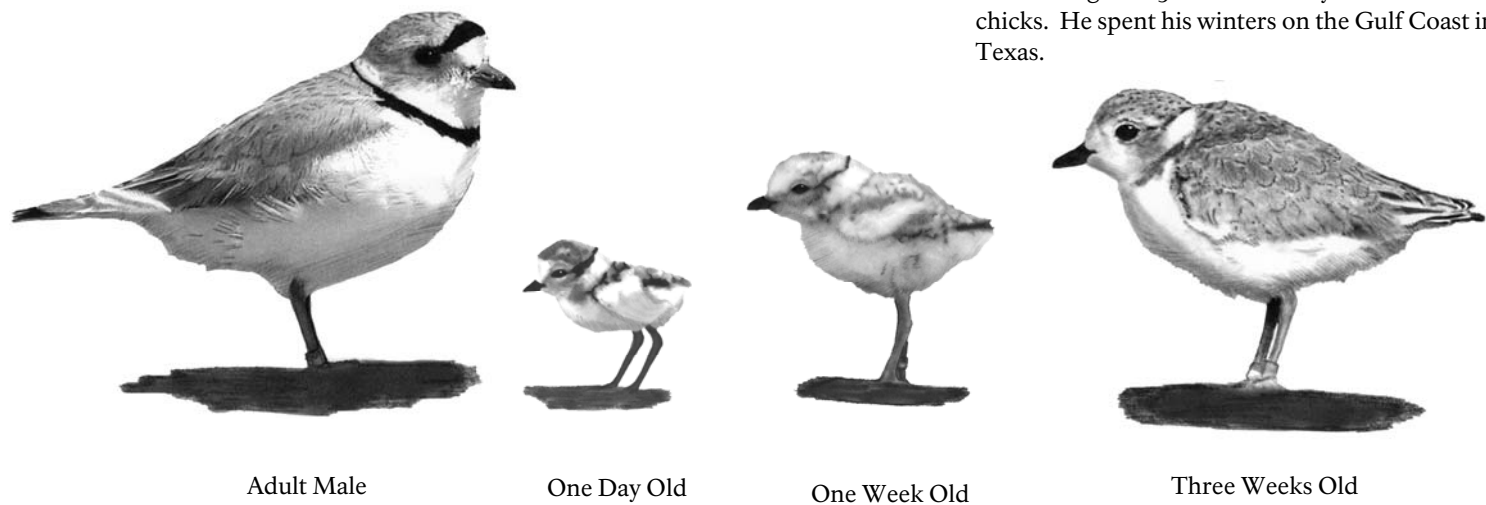
With this intensive program the number of Great Lakes nesting Plovers has risen from 17 pairs in 1986 to over 60 pairs in 2007.

Getting to know individual Piping Plovers

As part of the Piping Plover monitoring and recovery efforts each bird is banded with colored bands that identify it.

Color bands allow researchers and park staff to keep track of longevity, faithfulness to nest sites and mates, and genetics, among other things.

For example, we know that one of the males that nested at Platte Point was first banded in 1994 on North Manitou Island, and nested every year at Platte Point from 1997 to 2006. He had the same territory each year and the same mate all but two of those years. Each year from 1997 through 2000 he raised three of his four chicks to flying, and from 2001 through 2005 he successfully raised all four chicks. He spent his winters on the Gulf Coast in Texas.



Plover behaviors to watch

From late April through Early June

- Flight displays** – Males begin displaying when they first return in order to establish their territories and to attract a female to join them. They fly over their chosen territory with quick, stiff wing beats, peeping constantly.
- Territory defense** – Both males and females engage in territory defense. They walk shoulder to shoulder along the boundary with the birds from the adjacent territory. Sometimes they lower their heads, puff up their back feathers, and charge at a trespassing bird.
- Scraping** – Males lay on their chests and scrape out nest sites by kicking backwards with their legs.
- Incubation and trading incubation duties – Both parents participate equally in incubating (sitting on the eggs). When it is time to trade duties one bird runs quickly to the nest and the other then runs away.
- Feeding** – Plovers spend much of their day eating insects, spiders, and other small creatures.

During June and July

- Chicks** – Chicks hatch throughout the month of June. They are precocial – they can run about and feed themselves within hours of hatching. It takes them three to four weeks to grow enough to be able to fly.
- Brooding** – During the first week after hatching, chicks are unable to maintain their own body temperature. They spend much time tucked in under their parents’ wings staying warm. You might see a fat-looking adult bird that appears to have up to 10 legs!
- Territory Defense** – See the description in the April through June section
- Chick Defense** – The adults take turns watching over their chicks and defending them from predators. They sometimes do a broken-wing act to lead predators away. They also give a call that warns the chicks to hide if danger threatens.
- Feeding** - See the description in the April through June section.

How you can help protect Piping Plovers

- The Great Lakes population of Piping Plovers is endangered for two main reasons: habitat loss and predation. The beaches they require for nesting habitat are also very desirable to humans for development and recreational use. Dogs and cats, as well as wild predators such as gulls, crows, raccoons, and foxes often harass and kill Plover adults and chicks and also take their eggs.
- Please observe and obey the closed area fences. Watch and enjoy Plovers from a distance.
- Keep dogs and other pets on leashes and out of areas of the beach closed to pets.
- Don’t feed gulls or leave food on the beach. This increases the gull population and attracts predators to the area that will also prey on Piping Plovers.

- If you find a Plover family outside of the fencing give them some space. The small chicks can quickly hide in sand or cobble and are easily stepped on.
- Watch for and report sightings of Piping Plovers nesting in new areas. Call Sleeping Bear Dunes Headquarters in Empire (231-326-5134)
- If you see anyone harrassing Piping Plovers please report it to Sleeping Bear Dunes Headquarters. (231-326-5134)
- Volunteer to join the Piping Plover Patrol. Call Sleeping Bear Dunes Headquarters. (231-326-5134)
- Observe and enjoy this endangered and endearing shorebird.